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ABSTRACT

A composition course was redesigned so that the research paper assignment might be better integrated with the rest of the course and provide a source for inquiry throughout the course. Students read a report speculating on the ecological and industrial problems the world is likely to face in the year 2000. Values clarification exercises were used to help illustrate the problems' relationships, stimulate class discussion, and identify the students' prejudices about the problems. The students began immediately to explore the issues in the report through library reading and class discussion, and each decided tentatively upon the area he or she wished to research. After writing a series of essays to define the problems, analyze causes and effects, and argue proposed solutions, each student joined two or three others with similar research interests and collaborated to complete the assignment. The group members held different political views and functioned as small, somewhat heterogeneous communities that debated, haggled, and by necessity compromised for the sake of common goals. The groups then shared their findings with the rest of the class in a half-hour symposium. Each individual section and the collaborative effort were evaluated. The research paper assignment should be designed not only to help students improve their writing skills, but also to help them develop broad analytical abilities applicable to a variety of disciplines. (HTH)

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Teaching the Research Paper: An Integrative Approach

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Perhaps your experience teaching the research paper has been similar to ours. Our instruction in the other units of the composition course emphasized the writing process, peer evaluation, and a student-centered approach, but we continued to teach the research paper as if we had been unaffected by current writing theory. We knew that good writing often springs from feelings, experiences, and values, but we seemed to abandon that knowledge when teaching the research paper. We understood that much writing should begin reflexively, offering the student the opportunity first to understand the self and then move outward to something other, but when we taught the research paper we forgot that also. We knew that units in a composition course ought to be integrated with those preceding and following, but seldom did we teach the research paper as an integral part of the course. It stood alone as the last major assignment of the semester. Consequently, the students viewed it as a kind of writing vastly different from that they had composed previously in the course, and as a result, they often approached it with apprehension, if not dread. Thus, our task was not only to redesign the research paper assignment, but also to restructure an entire course so that the research paper might provide the focus for inquiry throughout. In addition, we wanted our course to meet an important criterion of the Essentials of Education statement: to develop "informed, thinking citizens capable

of participating in both domestic and world affairs."

The "reader" we chose for the course was The Global 2000 Report to the President (1980), prepared by the Department of State and the Council on Environmental Quality. Among the report's conclusions are that by the year 2000 several hundred tons of highly radioactive spent nuclear fuels, most with half-lives approximately five times as long as recorded history, will be generated by nuclear plants; one hectare of arable land will have to support 4 people, as opposed to 2.6 people in 1970; the world's desert areas will expand by almost 20%; virtually all the physically accessible forests in the less-developed countries will have been cut; population growth alone will cause demands for water to double relative to 1971 in nearly half of the world's countries; and one-half to two million species--15-20% of all species on earth--could become extinct. Global 2000, the first volume of which the class read during the first week, set the tone for the course by creating a sense of urgency and purpose, and defined the subject matter for research: population, hunger, pollution, energy, or distribution of wealth considered either locally, nationally, or globally.

The students readily comprehended the enormity of the problems discussed in Global 2000, but they understood neither how the problems were related nor how their biases hindered their ability to propose effective solutions. To help illustrate the problems' relationships, stimulate class discussion, and identify the students' prejudices about the problems, we used values clarification exercises, some similar to the following (abbreviated) questionnaire on world hunger:

1. According to the New York Times, (20%, 30%, 40%) of the U.S.'s food aid in fiscal 1974 went to hungry nations; the rest went to

support U.S. foreign policy. (Answer: 20%)

2. Nearly (2/5, 3/5, 4/5) of all the grain we produce is fed to animals. (4/5)
3. Each steer in a feedlot eats (50, 150, 400) pounds of grain in one month. The average third-world person eats (400, 500, 600) pounds of grain in one year. (400, 400)
4. If Americans would substitute chicken for (1/3, 1/2, 2/3, 3/4) of their beef consumption, enough grain would be released to feed 100,000,000 people every year. (1/3)
5. In 1974 the U.S. ranked (1st, 5th, 10th, 14th) among 17 nations providing developmental assistance when aid was measured as a percentage of GNP. (14th)
6. The U.S. is dependent upon imports for at least half of its supply of (2, 4, 6, 8) of the 13 raw materials required of a modern economy. By 2000 the U.S. is expected to import most of its supply of (6, 8, 10, 12) of these materials. (6, 12)

After the students completed the questionnaire, we posed a series of questions, attempting to identify the assumptions and clarify those values underlying the students' answers. We composed similar questionnaires for other issues treated in Global 2000, and we used values clarification exercises found in C. Hawley, et al., Composition for Personal Growth (New York: Hart, 1973); L. Raths, et al., Values and Teaching (Columbus, Ohio: Chas. E. Merril, 1966); and S. Simon, et al., Values Clarification (New York: Hart, 1972).

Although our students did not begin writing the research paper as-

signment until the second half of the course, they began immediately to explore the issues in Global 2000 through library reading and class discussion. By the second week or so, each decided tentatively upon the area he or she wished to research. Then the students wrote a series of exploratory essays. The first identified and defined the problem(s) later, perhaps, to be discussed in the research paper; the second essay analyzed the causes and/or effects of the problem(s); the third classified approaches to solve them; and the fourth essay argued proposed solutions. The objective of the essays was to allow students to explore their topics from various points of view and to begin to create a "reservoir" of information and ideas to draw on for the research paper. The essays were written after the students worked through various discovery procedures and engaged in values clarification exercises. These exploratory essays, then, functioned as heuristics for the composing of the research paper.

After writing some exploratory essays and identifying an area of interest, each student joined two or three others with similar research interests and collaborated to complete the research paper assignment. Each group member composed a section of the body of the research paper, and the group collaborated to write a summary, introduction, conclusion, references, and a bibliography. Each student thus received two evaluations: an individual assessment for his or her own section of the paper; and a group assessment for the collaborative elements.

The collaboration required the students to cooperate and to state and resolve differences. Although the students worked in similar content-areas, they held different political views, and thus their groups functioned as

small, somewhat heterogeneous communities which debated, haggled, and by necessity compromised for the sake of common goals. Each group was also a community of readers, a community in which each individual's attitudes and opinions were known to all. Thus, the students found themselves writing to a specific audience--their group--which offered them immediate response during pre-writing activities and peer-evaluation of their writing.

When the research papers were completed, the groups shared their findings with the rest of the class in half-hour symposia. One group member introduced the subject, each member summarized his or her section of the paper, and one member presented the groups findings and recommendations for solving the problems discussed. As with the research papers, the students were provided individual and collaborative assessments. It was sometimes the case that students who had struggled through the written part of the research paper assignment, frequently seeking advice and assistance from their groups, were the students giving advice and assistance for the symposia so that their group would present its findings clearly and gracefully.

In a course designed similar to the one we have discussed, any number of "readers" concerning other important issues could be used. The class time devoted to the discussion of issues and that devoted to the writing process should, naturally, be tailored to the broader goals of the course. Those goals and objectives, however, might profitably rest on the following assumptions:

1. Good writing is the discovery, creation, and construction of meaning, involving us "in a process of coming-into-being" (Sondra Perl, "Understanding Composing," CCC, 31 /1980/, 367).

2. Much writing, whether the product is reflexive or extensive, should begin reflexively, offering the writer the opportunity to understand the self and then move outward toward an undertanding of something other.
3. Thus, as a corrolary to #1 and #2, good writing springs from experiences, emotions, and values.
4. Writing, as it is actually performed outside of school, is frequently a collaborative effort in which writers receive feedback during the writing process; thus, writing in school should involve similar collaboration.
5. The research paper should not be taught as an isolated unit in the composition course but should be integrated with other units.
6. The research paper assignment should be designed not only to help students increase their writing skills and master research techniques but also to help them develop broad, analytical abilities applicable to a variety of disciplines and, as set for in the Essentials of Education statement, to develop "informed, thinking citizens capable of participating in both domestic and world affairs."